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ABSTRACT

An evaluation of an alternative program for at-risk high school students offered in the Porter County (Indiana) school system is described in this report. The evaluation was based on student assessments of the program, obtained through use of an interview format. The program, which provides instruction in basic subject areas required for graduation is one in which programs are individualized, courses can be started and completed at any time, grades are not awarded, and credit is given for successful completion. The interviews were conducted in the program's second year, 1991, during which 62 of the 72 participating students were interviewed. Prior to the interview, each student was identified by the school staff as either hardworking, performing satisfactorily, or doing poorly. This identification was done to enable evaluators to learn about any differences in responses among these three categories of students. The interview covered the following topics: (1) reasons for attendance; (2) future plans; (3) program assessment; (4) faculty assessment; (5) assessment of other students; (6) assessment of program's unique aspects; and (7) comparison with home schooling. The results show that students were generally supportive of the program (girls somewhat more than boys), individualized instruction was well received, teacher interaction was very positive, and most of the students supported the non-grading format. Overall, the results indicate that at-risk students who were in jeopardy of not completing high school are now in the process of doing so and are happy with the process. Included are the interview instrument and 16 tables. (JB)

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STUDENT ASSESSMENT OF THE PROGRAM AT AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

by

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Student Assessment of the Program at an Alternative High School for At-Risk Students

INTRODUCTION

The Porter County Alternative High School began operation in September, 1990, to provide individualized programs for at-risk students in any of the nine high schools in the county. Criteria for admission include recommendation by the home school principal, a past record indicating a high probability that the student will not succeed in the regular setting, and the student's willingness to sign a behavioral expectations contract with the alternative high school.

Program

The program provides basic programs required for graduation (English, mathematics, science, social studies, physical education) and additional electives in home economics and computers. Students attend a 3-period session in the morning (7:50-10:15 am) or afternoon (11:50-2:15 pm). Programs are individualized and courses can be started and completed at anytime. Credits are sent back to the home high school from which the diploma is received upon completion of all requirements. There are no grades; only credit for successful completion is given.

School enrollment varies since students can start and complete programs at any time. General enrollments in midyear vary from 70-90 students. The school staff consists of a principal (who also teaches physical education), an assistant principal (who also teaches home economics) and five teachers, one each in mathematics, science, social

studies, and two in English. There is also a part-time teacher of computers.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

In November, 1991, during the second year of the program, it was decided to obtain student assessment of the program by interviewing each member of the student body using a structured instrument. (See Appendix.) Sixty-two of the 72 students that were in school in early December were interviewed by seven students and the instructor of a Valparaiso University graduate class in educational research. The ten students not interviewed were five who were too new to the program (enrollment before October 15 was the cutoff date), two who were enrolled in vocational education and not the regular school program, and three students who were absent due to illness during the week of interviewing.

Table I gives a composite picture of the students who were interviewed.

Table 1

Interviewed Alternative High School Students

by Home School, Grade Level, and Sex.

	Student Totals	12th grade		11th grade		10th grade		9th grade	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Valparaiso	21	7	9	0	3	0	2	0	0
Portage	20	1	3	6	2	2	5	0	1
Duneland (Chesterton)	6	2	0	1	3	0	0	0	0
Porter Twnshp (Boone Grove)	3	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0
Union Township (Wheeler)	3	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0
Washington Township	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Morgan Township	4	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Pleasant Township (Kouts)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Boone Township (Hebron)	5	0	0	1	0	4	0	0	0
	62	12	14	9	9	10	7	0	1

As can be seen from the table, students were enrolled from all schools except Washington or Pleasant (Kouts) townships, the number of boys and girls were the same (31 each), and only one student was a ninth grader. Valparaiso and Portage each provided about one-third of the student body; the remaining third came from five other high schools.

Each student was interviewed for seven to ten minutes during school hours by one of the graduate students or the instructor. Anonymity was assured each student. The structured instrument was closely followed. The graduate students received detailed instruction

on the interviewing process and underwent supervised practice sessions prior to interviewing for the study. The instrument was developed by the research class in consultation with the faculty of the alternative school. Prior to the interviews each student was identified by the school staff as (1) hard working, (2) performing satisfactorily, or (3) doing poorly or non-functioning. This identification was done for analysis of responses to see if there was a difference in responses among these three categories of students. There were 13 students in the first category, 35 in the second, and 14 in the third. Students ranged in age from 14 to 20.

INTERVIEW RESULTS

Reasons for Attendance

Students gave one of seven reasons why they were attending the alternative school instead of the home school. These were:

Reason	Number
1. Failing	12
2. Expelled (or about to be)	4
3. Excessive absenteeism	15
4. Dislike school	12
5. Dropout (or about to)	6
6. Pregnant or parenthood	6
7. Needed only a few credits to graduate	7
	62

The 49 students in the first five categories represent likely academic failure. Almost all of the students would likely not have completed high school except for the opportunity provided in the alternative setting.

About two-thirds (44) of the students found out about this alternative opportunity from their home school administrators or counselors. Eighteen of the students, however, first heard of this opportunity from family members or friends and then initiated enrollment through the home school.

Future Plans

Of the 62 students, 46 plan to receive a high school diploma through this work in the alternative school, 13 plan or hope to return to their home school after the semester or the year to complete high school, while 3 do not yet know their plans for next year. All 62 did say they plan to get a high school diploma; 21 said they changed their mind about this after enrolling in the alternative high school. This optimism is remarkable considering the prospects of the 62 prior to enrolling in the alternative school. Even more remarkable is that about one-fourth of them (16) now plan to attend college after graduation. As one twelfth grade female said, "I never considered college before; school was so stressful."

In addressing post-graduation plans, the 46 who expect to complete graduation requirements at the alternative school gave the following:

College Attendance	16
Trade School Attendance	9
Work	10
Armed Forces	4
Homemaker	1
Don't Know	7

Surprisingly, since the school is evenly divided between males and females, of the 16 who are planning or hoping to attend college, 14 are females and only 2 are males.

Relative to all future plans, 20 of the 62 said attendance at this school had caused a change in their plans. Said one male eleventh grader, "Before coming here I had no plans for the future; this school helped."

Assessment of the School Program

Students were asked about the degree to which the program seemed worthwhile. In rating to what extent attendance at this school was worthwhile, the students gave the following:

Attendance here is:

Very worthwhile	30
Worthwhile	29
Don't know	2
Generally not worthwhile	1
Not worthwhile at all	0

Typical comments by students were, "You learn more because you do it," and "If this school would've been around for a while, then there would be less dropouts."

This very positive response represented all groups; the three less positive responses were mixed between grade levels and boys and girls and seemed to represent unique situations. As might be expected, students rated by teachers as not functioning well were less positive than students who were rated as working satisfactorily or working hard; the latter two groups rated the program equally worthwhile.

Assessment of the Faculty

Ratings of teachers were gathered in three categories, being helpful, friendly, and caring. Here, too, the students were very positive in their assessments.

Teachers are:

Very helpful	33	Very friendly	26	Very caring	21
Helpful	23	Friendly	30	Caring	27
Don't know	5	Don't know	3	Don't know	14
Generally not helpful	1	Generally not friendly	3	Generally not caring	0
Not Helpful at all	0	Not friendly at all	0	Not caring at all	0

Ratings here differed somewhat between boys and girls, with girls providing somewhat higher ratings in all three categories. For example, of the 33 who said teachers were very helpful, 20 were girls and 13 were boys; of the 26 who found teachers very friendly, 16 were

girls and 10 were boys. Of the 26 responses that were "don't know" or lower, two/thirds (17) came from boys.

Afternoon students rated teachers much higher in helpfulness (perhaps due to the smaller enrollment then) and somewhat higher in caring. An interesting, but positive sign, is that students who were here last year rated teachers somewhat higher than students who are new this year. Students who had been rated by teachers as "hardworking" or "working satisfactorily" rated teachers equally well on being helpful and friendly and slightly higher than students rated as not functioning well. However, when it comes to teachers caring, the "non-functioners" and "satisfactory performers" rated teachers equally high, with the "hard-workers" rating them slightly less - an interesting finding. Nevertheless, overall 90 percent of the students found the teachers helpful and friendly, and nearly 80 percent found them caring - a very fine tribute to the teachers' efforts in the program. Student admiration for what the faculty is doing for their benefit is typified by the following quotes:

- I was surprised at how helpful the teachers are
- Teachers are really great! They go out of the way to help you with things other than just school.
- I appreciate the respectfulness of the teachers to the students
- Every school should be like this. Teachers treat students as individuals.
- The people are much more friendly, the pace is easier.
- The staff knows exactly what students' troubles are and do something about it.
- Not an easy life not living at home, but the teachers really help me.

Assessment of other Students

Students were asked about the friendliness and caring of other students, -- this, because the school program is designed to get students to be supportive of each other.

Students assessments of other students as friendly or caring were not as high as their assessments of teachers in this regard.

Assessment of Other Students

Very friendly	4	Very caring	3
Friendly	48	Caring	18
Don't know	5	Don't know	26
Generally not friendly	3	Generally not caring	10
Not friendly at all	2	Not caring at all	5

Still, well over 80% of the students found the other students friendly. However, only about one-third (34%) found other students as caring.

Relative to friendliness, boys and girls were about equal in their assessment of this, as were morning and afternoon students. As might be expected, students here for the second year found other students a little more friendly than did students new this year. What is a little surprising is that the students categorized by teachers as "non-functioning" found the other students friendlier by far than did the "hard working" students. The percentages are given in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Percentage of Student Response by Teacher-determined Categories on the Friendliness of other Students

	Hard-working students (N=13)	Students performing satisfactorily (N=35)	Poor or non-functioning students (N=14)
Very friendly	--	6%	14%
Friendly	69%	80%	79%
Don't Know	8%	8%	7%
Generally not friendly	15%	3%	--
Not friendly at all	8%	3%	--

Students found other students not as caring as they were friendly. Girls found other students were slightly more caring than boys; morning students were assessed slightly more caring than afternoon students; and students here for the second year found students slightly more caring than did first year students. Again, the surprise was to discover "poor or non-functioning" students finding other students more caring than "hard-working" students did, with the "satisfactory" performers in between.

Comments from different students reflected this mixed perception of students' caring and friendliness, such as:

- most students mind their own business; not as gossipy here
- people here are very accepting
- some students should be asked to leave
- all are willing to help each other
- nobody will associate with me
- students all know each others' names

Student Assessment of Unique Aspects

Students were asked their assessment of four practices that are relatively unique to the alternative high school. These four are:

1. No grades are given. Students are given credit only for satisfactory completion of a course.
2. Learning is all individualized; there are no class lectures, presentations, or discussions. Students work at their own pace.
3. Discipline is enforced by the 750-minute rule. Each tardy, unexcused absence, or other infraction "costs" a set number of minutes. When the 750 minutes are used up the student is no longer permitted to attend the school. Students can earn additional minutes by meritorious behavior or other pre-established contributions to the program.
4. Each Friday the entire student bodies in the morning and afternoon sessions meet in a group session for announcements, activities, and awarding of bonus minutes. These sessions are designed to help develop a sense of community and the self-esteem of the individual members in it.

Students had generally (1) very positive feelings about the individualized instruction, (2) slightly less positive feelings about the lack of grades, (3) mixed feelings, though still more positive than negative, about the 750- minute rule, and (4) even more mixed feelings on the Friday sessions.

A breakdown of responses for the first three above is given in the following table, comparing each to practices at their old school.

	No grades	Individualized learning	750-minute rule
Much Better	47%	65%	23%
Better	32%	29%	37%
About the same	15%	1%	21%
Worse	13%	5%	11%
Much Worse	0%	0%	8%

The high rating for individualized learning was reinforced by many students who commented, "You go at your own pace." This seemed important to many of them, though one student commented, "I do better with a deadline. I get lazy here."

Relative to the no grades policies, assessments were just slightly higher for girls, afternoon students, students new this year, and hard-working students. With respect to individualized learning, students in all subgroups were about the same in their assessment with students new this year and hard-workers rating this a little higher. The above assessments for the 750-minute rule were shared equally by boys and girls and morning and afternoon students, with students from last year and non-functioning students liking it slightly more than the others.

Students offered a number of comments on each. Several were concerned that the lack of grades might inhibit college admissions, but several also found the lack of grades a positive in making school less stressful. Some of the students commented positively on (1) being able

to work at their own speed, (2) being treated more like adults, and (3) the individualized help they got from the teachers. On the other hand, several commented on the need for deadlines to keep them on task.

The 750-rule was generally accepted with the positive aspects stated of "being able to earn minutes back," and "you know where you stand." The criticisms voiced by the students were (1) the number of minutes lost for being just barely tardy, or (2) the need for more than 750-minutes, especially if absenteeism was job-related.

The Friday session was the least popular of the four unique aspects of the program, but was still received more positively than negatively. Student response is given below, in percent.

I like the Friday Sessions:

Very much	15%
Some	27%
O.K.	40%
Not very much	8%
Not at all	10%

The sessions were appreciated more by the girls than the boys, with almost all of the negative ratings being given by boys. The ratings for the whole group were shared nearly equally by hard-working, satisfactory, and non-functioning students, and by students new this year compared to second year students. Afternoon students gave a slightly higher rating, probably due to the slightly larger proportion of girls in this session.

Students gave a large number of comments on the Friday sessions, summarized briefly here, and identified by the sex of the respondent:

Positive Comments		Negative Comments	
1. Learn to work together	(M)	1. Waste of time	(M)
2. Keeps people together	(M)	2. Boring	(M)
3. A break	(F)	3. Stupid, strange games	(F)
4. All help each other	(F)	4. Just don't like them	(F)
5. Talk things over	(F)	5. Treat you like kids	(F)
6. I look forward to it	(F)	6. We call it family meeting game	(M)

While there may be indications here of some things that might improve the benefits of these group sessions, it is encouraging that 82% of the students think these sessions are "O.K." or better.

Student Comparison with Home School

Students were asked to compare their experiences at the Alternative High School with those at their former high schools. They were asked in terms of learning, enjoying, and preferring. Their responses were:

	Learning	Enjoying
Much more	42%	64%
More	32%	23%
About the same	23%	11%
Less	3%	0%
Much less	0%	2%

Girls expressed more positive responses than boys in both learning and enjoying. There was no difference between morning and afternoon groups in this regard, and virtually no difference between first year students and second-year students. Once again, surprisingly, the non-functioning students stated their "learning more" than did their "satisfactory" and "hard-working" counterparts, (though this may be due to their having more to learn). The three groups were equal in their very positive response of enjoying school more.

With regard to school preference, the following percentages were obtained:

	School Preference
Very Much Prefer School Here	61%
Prefer School Here	29%
Don't Care	2%
Prefer To Be At Home School	6%
Very Much Prefer To Be At Home School	2%

This strong support for the alternative high school experience was even stronger among girls; all of the responses in the two lowest categories were from males. Since the responses were in general uniformly positive about preference for the alternative school experience, there were no differences found, as expected, between the three subgroups of students. Typical were comments such as:

- Less pressure here
- Not as frustrating as the high school
- I miss my home school, but this is a better situation
- It's just overall different; they know you personally

Student response about what they liked most about the school explains some of this strong preference. (The numbers in parenthesis indicates the number who volunteered this response. Some gave two responses.)

1.	Shorter school day	(17)
2.	The teachers	(14)
3.	Work at your own pace	(14)
4.	The whole atmosphere	(10)
5.	Small size	(5)
6.	Chance for a diploma	(4)
7.	Able to have job	(3)
8.	Learn more	(3)
9.	No lectures	(2)
10.	Attendance policy	(2)

While one might expect the shorter school day to be preferable, the fact that the teachers, the program, the atmosphere, and the size gathered votes from 46 of the 62 students as being why they most liked attending is a strong testimonial to positive reception the school gets by the students.

There were some dislikes too, of course, but far fewer of them. Nearly half of the students replied, "nothing", when asked concerning things they disliked.

The things most disliked offered by the other half are given below, with the number of students naming each in parenthesis:

1. 750-minute rule, or aspects of its implementation (11)
2. Other students (7)
3. Friday group sessions (3)
4. School day too short (3)
5. No sports (2)
6. Some teachers, favoritism (2)
7. Early hours (2)

These dislikes are somewhat reflected in the things the students would change if given a chance. One-half (31) offered suggestions for change:

1. Change 750-minute rule, especially losing 10 minutes for being one minute late (8)
2. Need longer day, more class periods (5)
3. Drop Friday meetings (3)
4. Have longer breaks between classes, permit smoking (3)
5. Get rid of students with bad attitudes (2)
6. Sports program; compete for home school (2)

Students were asked if their family life had changed because of the opportunity to attend the alternative high school and continue their education. Answers given were:

Yes - 16 Don't know - 7 No - 39

While the "no's" and "don't know's" predominate, most of the 16 who said "yes" were uniform in their assessment that alternative school attendance led to positive change in their home situation. Expressions about home life were along the lines of:

- Less arguing about grades
- Much better
- Less stress
- Parents are happier

As one girl said, "Being miserable at school always made me mad; my Mom has noticed a big change for the better."

Finally, students were asked to rate the school experience overall. Ratings received, with tallies noted, were:

Excellent	26	(42%)
Good	25	(40%)
Fair	9	(14%)
Poor	0	
Very Poor	1	(2%)
No answer	1	(2%)
	62	

Student comments that reflect these rating were:

- Gives me a chance to be more grown up and responsible
- I learn more about myself here. I realize that you can work harder than you thought if you try harder.
- You learn more because you do it.

SUMMARY

It seems fair to summarize the findings of these interviews thus:

1. The students are generally supportive to strongly supportive of the alternative school concept, program, and teachers.
2. Girls are generally slightly more supportive than boys; second year students are slightly more supportive than first year students.
3. Not much difference was found between the responses of the morning and afternoon groups.
4. Classification of students as (1) hard-working, (2) satisfactory, and (3) poor or non-functioning provided different response patterns for some items, but no consistent pattern was found where one group was always more positive or negative than the others.
5. Individualized instruction permitting students to work at their own pace is very well-received.
6. The teachers' supportive attitudes, working one-on-one with the students, and respecting them as individuals was noted as a strong positive.
7. The no-grading system was generally well-received, but some students noted this might hurt in college admissions.
8. While still viewed positively, in general, the 750-minute rule and the Friday group sessions drew the most student apathy or opposition.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It seems fair to conclude from the responses of the 62 students that the alternative high school is fulfilling the function for which it was started, at least in the eyes of the students. At risk students who were in jeopardy of not completing high school are now in the process of doing so, and are quite happy with the process. This conclusion is made somewhat tentative by the fact that 12 other students enrolled in Fall, 1991, but dropped our before the interviews were conducted in December. It would have been good to have their input. We cannot assume their perceptions of the school were either positive or negative by their dropping out. A follow-up study in the future to see if the results found here are still maintained might well include interviewing those who drop out to get a more accurate picture of how well the school serves all of its enrollees. Then, too, graduates of the program ought also then to be interviewed.

The students in their responses raised a number of questions about the Friday sessions and the 750-minute rule. Whether these criticisms or suggestions provide ideas for modification is something that school officials may wish to consider. The fact that these issues are raised by only a minority of the students indicates these programs are generally well-received; maybe only a few modifications are necessary to meet student concerns or to make these aspects of the program better received.

Except for the issues raised in the paragraphs above, the perceptions received from the students in general supports this concluding statement that at-risk students are pleased with the second chance opportunity the alternative high school provides them and the type of program offered.

Student Interview Date_____

Age_____ Grade_____ Sex_____ Outside job?(20+ hrs/wk)_____

Attended here last year? _____ Independent or living with parent(s)?_____ Credits Completed ____

_____ _____

I. Why are you enrolled in this alternative high school?

(1) Attendance problem (2) Drop Out (3) Failing grades

(4) Pregnancy/motherhood (5) Smoking (6) Other _____

_____

How did you find out about the opportunity to continue your schooling at this alternative high school?

_____

II. How long do you expect to attend here?

(1) Till graduation in _____ months (2) End of Semester (3) End of this year (4) Other _____

_____

III. What are your plans after leaving this alternative high school?

(1) Go back to old school (2) College (3) Trade school

(4) Marriage (5) Work _____ (6) Don't know

Comments: _____

Has being here changed these plans from before?

(1) Yes (2) Don't Know (3) No Comment:_____

IV. Do you plan to get a high school diploma?

(1) Yes (2) Don't Know (3) No Comment:_____

If yes, has your attending here changed your mind about this?

(1) Yes (2) Don't Know (3) No Comment:_____

V. We'd like some of your reactions to attending this school. I'll give you a choice of answers for you to pick one. Let me read the entire list of choices before you choose.

Attendance here is:

(1) very worthwhile (2) worthwhile (3) don't know (4) generally not worthwhile (5) not worthwhile at all

The teachers are:

(1) very helpful (2) helpful (3) don't know (4) generally not helpful (5) not helpful at all

The teachers are:

(1) very friendly (2) friendly (3) don't know (4) not very friendly (5) not friendly at all

The students in general are:

(1) very friendly (2) friendly (3) don't know (4) not very friendly (5) not friendly at all

The teachers are:

(1) very caring (2) caring (3) don't know (4) not very caring (5) not caring at all

The students in general are:

(1) very caring (2) caring (3) don't know (4) not very caring (5) not caring

Comment: _____

VI. How do you compare your experience here to what you had at your home high school?

(1) Learn much more (2) Learn more (3) Learn about the same (4) Learn less (5) Learn much less

(1) Enjoy it much more (2) Enjoy it more (3) Enjoy it about same (4) Enjoy it less (5) Enjoy it much less

(1) Very much prefer school here (2) prefer school here (3) Don't care (4) Prefer to be at my home school (5) Very much prefer to be at my home school

Comment: _____

VII. We'd like to get your reactions to some of the methods used here compared to methods used at your old school.

No Grades:

(1) Much better (2) Better (3) About the same (4) Worse (5) Much worse

No classwork; working at your own speed:

(1) Much better (2) Better (3) About the same (4) Worse (5) Much worse

750 minute system for attendance or causing problems:

(1) Much better (2) Better (3) About the same (4) Worse (5) Much worse

How do you like the Friday full group meeting?

(1) Very much (2) Some (3) O.K. (4) Not very much (5) Not at all

Comment: _____

III. Has your personal or family life changed because of your attendance here?

(1) Yes (2) Don't know (3) No

Comment: _____

IX. What do you particularly like about this school?

_____

X. What do you particularly dislike about this school?

_____

XI. What would you change at this school?

_____

XII. Overall, how would you rate your experience here?

(1) Excellent (2) Good (3) Fair (4) Poor (5) Very poor

XIII. Is there anything you care to tell me about this school that I have not asked you about?

_____